

Assessing animal management priorities by survey

Gavin Hammond

We all live in different parts of Australia have different environmental conditions, have different councils, local laws, and officers to enforce them, however one thing common throughout the industry is the problems with animal management are universal. The issues of significance in Hobart will be similar to those in Townsville. Adelaide's problems will be similar to those in Sydney.

If this statement holds true, one generic model to deal with animal management issues would be all we require to deal with a majority of animal issues nationally.

In late 2001, Townsville had a rash of difficult animal owner issues. No matter what the issue, it became infected and inflamed. Animal owners were consistently telling us they were unaware of our laws and pleaded ignorance. The media loved these stories which ultimately left Council battered and bruised.

Council embarked on a program to

1. Find out what the community knew in relation to animal management
2. To gather information on community understandings and perceptions in relation to dog management in Townsville,

The information collected would then be used to develop a marketing strategy. This paper will address the results of our survey.

In mid to late 2001, the Townsville City Council experienced an explosion of complaints targeting the enforcement of local law.^[10] (Animal Management local law) The complainants consisted of residents who had breached the local law by;

- straying,
- walking dog off leash,
- not cleaning up dog litter,
- unregistered dogs.

Residents claimed they were unaware of our local law. Our standard response was that ignorance of the law was not a defense. Naturally this response met with some vigorous discussion which led to both sides becoming agitated. Council being the keeper of the law, were not in a position to back down. The owner of the animal, looking for a higher authority to adjudicate on the matter, ended up discussing the issue with an elected members who in turn sought a reason why Environmental Health were pursuing some of these issues.

The basis behind residents' allegations was never determined.

When this issue was looked at a little more closely, it was identified that Townsville's population consisted of a significant amount of military and government related occupations. As most of the government positions were outposts from the major capital cities, they were

regularly changed. The military is similar with a large turnover on a yearly basis. All of these people genuinely did not know the laws of Townsville in relation to animals and relied on the norm from their previous place of residence. The local laws at previous towns and cities may have been different than that which existed in Townsville.

This meant we had a cosmopolitan mix of ideas in relation to what the laws were in Townsville.

The simple fix to this situation was to publish a range of messages through the print media on issues Council thought were appropriate. This process involved one advertisement in the local paper every week for about 15 weeks. At the end of this process, there was no perceived change in attitudes in relation to dogs. If there was a change, it could not be identified as we had only limited information to benchmark against. Specialist surveys had been conducted on "Off leash areas", "Cat management on Magnetic Island" and "Hot spot", but unfortunately these surveys did not look at the greater issues of animal management.

The simple fix did not work, so we looked at other methods of reducing the increasing amounts of stress and workplace anxiety such negative interaction was causing. Our next solution looked at attempting to identify what we were up against before we implemented any further interventions. Our search to find a tool to assist us led to a humble survey. Indeed the survey was more than a survey, but an information gathering tool on two levels. It involved

1. Finding out what the community knew in relation to animal management and the laws governing animal management in Townsville.
2. To gather community understanding and perceptions in relation to animal management.

WHAT DID THE COMMUNITY KNOW ?

One way of determining what the community knows in relation to a law, was to look at the penalties that have been issued under that law. While it may not give an entirely accurate record of community knowledge, it does give a record of breaches of the law. Figures prior to the commencement of our surveys, indicated a large number of infringements for a small number of offences.

FINES

A summary of fines issued for the period July 1999 to January 2002 revealed the following:

Type of offence	Number	Percentage
Inadequate fencing	1062	38
Unregistered dogs	911	33
Unleashed animals	704	25
Others	57	4
	2734	100

It was interesting to note that the 2734 fines were given to 1959 people with 775 people being fined more than once.

Only three issues were used by Local Laws Officers, however the local law did contain several other offences that could be used.

In a thirty month period, just less than 100 PINS were issued every month.

Dog attacks

Dog attack figures used in these calculations are based on the number of attacks that had been reported to Council, investigated by officers and presented to Council with a recommendation to prosecute. Only when the Council agreed to prosecute does the incident become part of a statistic.

For the same period, the following statistics apply.

2001	96 dog attacks
2002	60 dog attacks

Survey document

Council was fortunate enough to have a section within our workforce who had substantial experience in developing survey documents and interpreting their results. This group were employed to assist us develop a survey document that would assist in gathering the information on resident knowledge of local law issues.

At the outset it was determined a telephone interview would be more convenient and cost effective. For the survey to be statistically significant for a population of 90,000 residents required a minimum 300 pieces of information.

The survey targeted only dog owners, as we wanted to determine what they knew in relation to animal management and if they were aware of their responsibilities in relation to the local law.

The survey document was designed to gather the following generic pieces of information.

- Date.
- Suburb.
- Dog.
- What type.
- How many.
- Gender of dogs.
- Age of the dog.
- How long their dog had been registered.
- How many infringement notices had they received in the past 12 months.
- If so, what was the nature of the fine.
- Was the respondent, male, or female.
- Age of respondent.

This information was to provide an overview of the population of Townsville and their animal ownership habits. It also would allow us to link the findings of the survey back to the population and to form some conclusions.

The specific components of the survey look at a number of issues:

- Where had respondents heard about animal management services?

- What was their knowledge of the specifics of the local laws?
- What information was known about the Animal Management Officers?
- Identification of animal management issues?
- What are the appropriate methods of providing information to respondents?
- What did respondents want information on?

General profile of respondents

From the generic people information, we developed some profiles of animal owners in Townsville.

1. The primary carer for dogs are predominantly female. (69%)
2. Age groups for all owners was evenly distributed through all ages from 18 to over 60 years.
3. More females were fined for offences than males.
4. Younger to middle age dog owners were more likely to be fined than older people.
5. Over half of the dogs owned by the respondents were Terriers, cattle dogs, bull terriers, Labradors, border collies, German Shepherds or Rotweilers.
6. 60% of residents own at least one dog
7. 37% of residents own at least two dogs.
8. The gender of dogs is 53% female and 47% male
9. Up to 10% of the dog owning public had been fined for an offence against the local law.
10. Everyone interviewed was very keen to participate in the survey which blew the time allowed for each survey from 10 mins to up to 30 minutes.

Results

The survey document did not solicit information, rather it relied on information provided by respondents. It was not a survey that relied on multiple choice type answers. This ensured the survey did not lead to pre conceived ideas.

Respondents were permitted to provide multiple answers to the questions. In the tables provided, I have provided two percentage columns. The first will show the percentage of the total answers for each item and the second column will show the percentage of respondents that replied to each item.

Table 1 Where current information could be found on animal management laws

	Number	% of answers	% of respondents
Newspaper articles	77	17.58	26
Direct contact with officers	77	17.58	26
Word of mouth	38	8.68	13
TV advertisements	36	8.22	12
Brochures (with dog registration)	36	8.22	12
Newspaper advertisement	29	6.62	10
Brochures (from various locations)	24	5.48	8
TV stories	19	4.34	6
Services (allies)	13	2.97	4
Posters / signs / stickers	12	2.74	4
Radio advertisement	8	1.83	3
Radio stories	6	1.37	2
Community events	1	0.23	0
Nowhere	58	13.24	19
No response	4	0.91	1
Total	438	100	

Without prompting or data cleaning, you can see a number of respondents were providing similar information. If the information is cleaned a little and placed in similar silos, the following results can be gathered.

If similar mediums are joined together, the results are:

	Number	% of answers	% of respondents
Newspaper articles	77	17.58	26
Direct contact with officers	77	17.58	26
Word of mouth	38	8.68	13
TV advertisements	36	8.22	12
Brochures (with dog registration)	36	8.22	12
Newspaper advertisement	29	6.62	10
Brochures (from various locations)	24	5.48	8
TV stories	19	4.34	6
Services (allies)	13	2.97	4
Posters / signs / stickers	12	2.74	4
Radio advertisement	8	1.83	3
Radio stories	6	1.37	2
Community events	1	0.23	0
Nowhere	58	13.24	19
No response	4	0.91	1
Total	438	100	

The survey has shown that a vast amount of information available at the time of the survey was being sourced through the printed media. This includes the newspapers, brochures, posters, stickers etc. The electronic media of television and radio did not score highly given that the last campaign was 6 months prior to this survey and targeted dog registration.

Of concern was the information regarding the source of information being passed on by word of mouth. This information Council has no control over its accuracy and does lead to the spread of incorrect information

19% of respondents were not aware of any information on animal management laws.

The results did accurately reflect the information dissemination regime currently at the time of this survey. That is a registration campaign was run each year which used the television, radio and newspaper along with a brochure being placed with each dog renewal notice.

It was interesting to note that no residents stated that the Animal Management Officers or the Council was a source of information.

Table 2 Preferred method of information dissemination

	Number	% of answers	% of respondents
Info with registration	77	16.01	26
Letterbox drop	68	14.14	23
Brochures / newsletters	56	11.64	19
TV advertisements	48	9.98	16
Info with first registration	44	9.15	15
Newspaper advertisements	32	6.65	11
Radio advertisements	16	3.33	5
Detailed book	14	2.91	5
Brochures from allies	13	2.7	4
Free newspapers	10	2.08	3
Others (8 different ideas)	36	7.48	11
Sufficient information	17	3.53	6
No response	50	10.4	17
	481	100	

Respondents had placed some efforts in this question which showed in the range of options available to disseminate information.

The provision of written information has clearly shown through with information provided direct to dog owners being highly represented.

It appeared that respondents wanted information they could sit down and read at their leisure on all aspects of animal management. This information could then be used as a reference for the dog owners.

Television and radio advertising were low down on the list of priorities and may have reflected in some way the makeup of previous advertising campaigns.

Over 10% of respondents provided no reply and it is not entirely sure if they were entirely happy about existing services or that they had no idea of how they wanted future information.

Table 3 What information did respondents want?

	Number	% of answers	% of respondents
Law and penalties (comprehensive)	128	22.7	43
Information/advice (general)	64	11.35	21
Leash requirements	47	8.33	16
Responsibilities of ownership	44	7.8	15
Roaming/stray animals	32	5.67	11
Dog training	26	4.61	9
Fencing	26	4.61	9
Excessive barking	24	4.26	8
Restricted areas	22	3.9	7
Locations of off-leash areas	21	3.72	7
Dog registration	20	3.55	7
Pick up after pet	18	3.19	6
Permits	17	3.01	6
Dog attacks	16	2.84	5
Useful contact numbers	5	0.89	2
Education on legal rights of owners	5	0.89	2
Promoting desexing	4	0.71	1
Sufficient information already	5	0.89	2
Other	5	0.89	2
No response	35	60.21	12
Total	564	100	

An overwhelming majority of dog owners were very keen to find out more about the law in relation to animal management and the penalties that could be imposed.

The best way to advise dog owners of this information was based on the identified issues. The top issues in relation to information were;

1. Restraint (leash requirements)
2. Responsibility of ownership
3. Confinement (Roaming and straying animal)
 - Dog training (Not a function of the law)
 - Fencing (Can be included in confinement)
4. Barking
 - Restricted areas
 - Location of off leash areas (Can be linked to restraint)
5. Dog registration
6. Pet Litter

The issue of restricted areas was a specific question to test the knowledge of residents in relation to no go zones for animals. It involved several other pieces of legislation both state and local, however it did show that a number of residents were aware dogs were not allowed on beaches and in food shops etc.

These issues form the basis of our existing animal management program with the exception of the inclusion of dog attacks. Dog attacks were raised in the priorities, however they were well down the list. This does equate with the owners of dogs believing their dog would never bite another person or dog. From experience, we can sympathize and empathize with these types of statements, however we are acutely aware that such incidents occur with a frequency that cannot justify such statements being made.

Biting and aggressive dogs would therefore form the seventh issue of animal management.

Dog owners were then asked what they knew of different aspects of the local law, including;

Table 4 Confinement

	Number	% of answers	% of respondents
Dog may be impounded/fee payable	168	46.28	56
Report stray dogs to Council	38	10.47	13
Not allowed/illegal	34	9.37	11
Owner may be fined	21	5.79	7
Aware that there are requirements	18	4.96	6
Owners should be contacted	7	1.93	2
Yard should be fenced/secure	6	1.65	2
Don't know	63	17.36	21
Other	3	0.83	1
No response	5	1.38	2
Total	363	100	

While there are no incorrect answers in this section, it did portray the knowledge of the community in relation to straying or roaming dogs. The intent of this component of the legislation was for owners to take responsibility for their animals by the provision of a fence or a secure part of the yard to allow their dogs to wander in. It seems this message has not been received.

The negative component of your dog being out in the street and being picked up and fined by the animal management officer was very paramount with over 50% of respondents knowing that if your dog is picked up, a fine will be payable. On the other end of the spectrum, almost 20% of respondents were not aware of any requirements for straying and roaming dogs. It could be these dog owners that proliferate the number of straying complaints our department is bombarded with.

Table 5 Biting and aggressive dogs

	Number	% of answers	% of respondents
Dog may be destroyed	78	19.16	26
Dog attacks should be reported to Council	57	14	19
Owner may be fined/prosecuted	49	12.04	16
Owner is responsible for medical costs	22	5.41	7
Aware that there are requirements	21	5.16	7
Dog attacks should be reported to police	17	4.18	6
Dangerous dogs should be muzzled	15	3.69	5
Display sign for dangerous dog	13	3.19	4
Dog can be deemed dangerous	9	2.21	3
Dogs which attack may be impounded	9	2.21	3
Owner should be contacted	5	1.23	2
Dog should be properly contained	4	0.98	1
Action depends on severity of attack	4	0.98	1
Don't know	94	23.1	31
Other	6	1.47	2
No response	4	0.98	1
Total	407	100	

Again there were no incorrect answers for this component of the survey. However it did identify the level of concern regarding dog attacks.

It is interesting in our current debate over “Breed” verses “Deed”, this survey did not show up any finding to suggest that residents wanted specific breeds to be defined as “Dangerous”. If you match this lack of suggestion against your own data base on which dogs do attack, I’m sure you will find there is no realistic linkage between the breed of dog and the number of dog attacks.

It did report a large number of residents who were unaware of what was required of them as owners in relation to a dog attack. They were not aware of their responsibilities if their dog was involved in a dog attack.

Severe dog attack receives tremendous amounts of publicity. . These reports concentrate on the graphic side of attacks and don’t concentrate on the methods of preventing or minimising dog attacks. They glorify types of dogs which are then taken up by security conscience people (at the insistence of Police) which then in turn breeds fear within the community. This is another side issue which could be the subject of another presentation at maybe the next conference.

The current negative reporting around dog attacks does instill fear in the community which counteracts the benefit dogs have on the community.

The survey did identify residents were aware that they should report incidents to Council and were aware of some of the ramifications of a dog being declared dangerous, ie muzzles, signage, prosecutions etc.

However in Queensland the dangerous dog model could be different in each of the 125 local authorities and it is now muddled by our first state wide piece of animal legislation on restricted breeds.

In the comments provided in the survey, it was not identified that owners of dogs were responsible for everything their animal did. In our litigious society, it is surprising that this statement is not forthcoming, however it is paramount that the onus of enforcing legislation dealing with dog attacks must rest greater on the owner of the dog rather than the regulating authority. Owners of dogs must be aware of this requirement.

Table 6 Barking

	Number	% of answers	% of respondents
Contact Council	147	33.87	49
Contact owner/mediate	61	14.06	20
Barking can't exceed certain time frame	34	7.83	11
Aware that there are requirements	24	5.53	8
Not permitted	19	4.38	6
Keep a journal	17	3.92	6
Owner can be warned or fined	16	3.69	5
Dog can be removed/destroyed	4	0.92	1
Dog should be placated	4	0.92	1
Don't know	97	22.35	32
Other	7	1.61	2
No response	4	0.92	1
Total	434	100	

Over 32% of respondents were not aware of the requirements in relation to excessive barking. This may account for the number of barking complaints being lodged with council health departments.

Second on the list after contact council is to attempt to mediate with the owner of the dog. As most dog barking complaints can be dealt with very quickly in this manner, this is one aspect that must be promoted.

Our council has found that in a majority of incidents, barking dogs complaints are justified, however residents do not want their neighbors to know that they had lodged the complaint. This builds up some additional barriers in the community that reduces the effectiveness of solving problems over the side or back fence.

While Council can act as a mediator in barking dog disputes, this places additional stress on your staff, the owner of the dog and even the complainant. Residents through this survey have identified their awareness needs to be strengthened to reduce our work loads and increase our effectiveness.

Barking complaints in Townsville are significant and one that if reduced will significantly reduce our work loads.

Table 7 Restraint

	Number	% of answers	% of respondents
Compulsory to use leash in public	145	47.7	48
Only off-leash in designated areas	109	35.86	36
Aware that there are requirements	29	9.54	10
Don't know	14	4.61	5
Other	7	2.3	2
Total	304	100	

This component provided some interesting results. Over 90% of dog owners were aware of the need to use leashes and that the only place to walk your dog off leash was in a designated area.

Less than 5% were not aware of leash laws.

These results can point to the fact that owners of dogs that are caught with dogs off leash have done so, willingly knowing that they have breached the law. That is despite all the reasons given when owners are caught with dogs off leash.

One point that did not come up in the survey, but is brought up when offences occur is that dogs need to be walked off leash and owners feel that not allowing their dog to walk free, like they do, is an enditement on the life of the dog. Owners are blissfully unaware of the potential for their dog to cause misadventure as I have said previously; their dog is not capable of biting.

Table 8 Confinement

	Number	% of answers	% of respondents
Property must be fenced	105	32.51	35
Fencing should be adequate (for breed)	55	17.03	18
Aware that there are requirements	39	12.07	13
Dog must be kept on property	24	7.43	8
Need a sign for savage dogs	3	0.93	1
Don't know	87	26.93	29
Other	8	2.48	3
No response	2	0.62	1
Total	323	100	

75% of respondents were aware that dogs must be kept on the property and be restrained there by a fence. This seems to be a high number, however just under 29% were not aware of any fencing laws. This is almost one third of all dog owners. The results are fairly cut and dry with dog owners either knowing or not knowing what was required.

Council's animal management program revolves around animals being adequately housed. This in turn would not allow dogs to roam, which in turn would reduce the number of barking complaints, straying / roaming, dog attacks and traffic accidents etc etc.

If all dogs were properly fenced, the number of animal related complaints would be reduced.

Table 9 Litter

	Number	% of answers	% of respondents
Compulsory to pick up after pet	148	44.85	49
Aware that there are requirements	68	20.61	23
Pick up after pet at beach/strand	39	11.82	13
Bags are provided in allocated areas	11	3.33	4
Carry a bag/pooper scooper	7	2.12	2
Penalties apply	4	1.21	1
Pick up after pet in parks	3	0.91	1
Pick up after pet in signed areas	2	0.61	1
Don't know	44	13.33	15
Other	1	0.3	0
No response	3	0.91	1
Total	330	100	

The removal of pet litter is an issue Council has never actively been involved in, with the exception of the placement of signs and pet litter bags at our “Dog off leash areas” and similar equipment on our newly developed strand.

The results in this section were none the less surprising with a vast majority of respondents providing answers that would suggest that they know they must pick up after their animal. 15% were unaware of requirements.

Council does not receive significant amounts of pet litter complaints, however this survey in previous tables did identify it was one of the major issues that dog owners were concerned with. Dog litter is a potential health risk as well as a visible eyesore on any landscape.

The supply of specialized bins and litter bags can create problems with dog owners only picking up after their animals when the facilities are provided. This does not appear to be an issues at this stage, however it could be if appropriate interventions are not put in place in the short term.

Table 10 Dog registration

	Number	% of answers	% of respondents
Must be registered annually	197	33.85	66
Compulsory	101	17.35	34
Annual fee due in June	63	10.82	21
Annual fee due in June/July/August	60	10.31	20
Discount for desexing	44	7.56	15
Discounts apply	40	6.87	13
Aware that there are requirements	21	3.61	7
Register at 6 months	11	1.89	4
Annual fee due in July	10	1.72	3
Dogs must wear a tag	9	1.55	3
Must be registered from 6 weeks	5	0.86	2
Fee and processes exist	5	0.86	2
Fine for not registering dog	3	0.52	1
Register dog as soon as acquired	3	0.52	1
Don't know	3	0.52	1
Other	6	1.03	2
No response	1	0.17	0
Total	582	10	

A vast majority of respondents were aware of dog registration, when it was required and when it was due. This would reflect on the education campaigns that Council had run for two months every year for the past 6 years or so.

The quantity and quality of message that respondents came back to us with, was very good, which would suggest that the campaign of previous years had been successful.

No respondent identified what the registration fees were to be used for and why they had to pay the fee. During registration times, this question is asked on a very frequent basis and dog owners must want to know what their fees are being used for.

Dog owners were also quizzed on what penalties apply to a range of different offences.

Table 11 Penalties

	Number	% of answers	% of respondents
Confinement	161	19.85	54
Dog attacks	135	16.65	45
Restraint - leash laws	124	15.29	41
Unregistered dogs	87	10.73	29
Not picking up after pet	69	8.51	23
Excessive barking	67	8.26	22
Using restricted areas	44	5.43	15
Restraint - fencing	29	3.58	10
Not obtaining permits	29	3.58	10
Neglect/abuse/cruelty to animals	14	1.73	5
Too many dogs on premises	8	0.99	3
Don't know	19	2.34	6
Other	4	0.49	1
No response	21	2.59	7
Total	811	100	

Respondents listed all issues as being ones that could involve a penalty if breaches were detected.

UNDERSTANDING AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE COMMUNITY

The preceding section identified the issues that were contained in the existing local law. The next question asked residents what they thought were the major problems being encountered in animal management. Their response included the following:

	Number	% of answers	% of respondents
Confinement - Roaming / Straying dogs	99	21.85	33
Responsible pet ownership	95	20.97	32
Aggressive dogs	43	9.49	14
Excessive barking	32	7.06	11
Dogs off leash	29	6.4	10
Confinement - Inadequate fencing	11	2.43	4
Pet litter	9	1.99	3
Too many unwanted animals	8	1.77	3
In sufficient dog off leash areas	8	1.77	3
Concerns about council action	8	1.77	3
Need for more dog training	7	1.55	2
Need stronger penalties	7	1.55	2
Too many dogs on premises	7	1.55	2
Loud barking	6	1.32	2
Unregistered dogs	5	1.1	2
Cruelty to dogs	5	1.1	2
High fines/inflexible laws	5	1.1	2
Dogs which are not desexed	4	0.88	1
Problems with cats / dingoes	4	0.88	1
No problems	34	7.51	11
Other	6	1.32	2
No response	21	4.64	7
Total	453	100	

It was interesting to see that respondents identified dog owners were an issue. Dogs are generally a reflection of their owner / master. If that person is generally a law abiding person who respects his neighbors and is not an aggressive compulsive type of person, generally

speaking their dog will be of little problems to Council, however the exact opposite will see a wandering, unregistered dog that is prepared to fight with everything it comes in contact with and it is these problems people we need to educate.

The perceived issues raised by the dog owners closely matched those currently in the local law.

Perceived issues	Local	Law
Confinement	Yes	Yes
Biting and Aggressive dogs	Yes	Yes
Barking	Yes	Yes
Restraint	Yes	Yes
Litter	Yes	Yes
Dog registration	Yes	Yes
Responsible pet ownership	Yes	Yes

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Gavin is employed by the Townsville City Council as a Principal Environmental Health Officer. He gained his qualifications as an EHO through the Queensland Institute of Technology in 1984. These qualifications were boosted by completing a Graduate Diploma in Management with the University of Central Queensland in 1996 and further upgraded to a Masters of Business Administration in 2002. His current role involves the management of a number of programs including animal management.

SUMMARY

The survey identified that a number of issues in the local law matched the perceived need of residents in the community. They included.

1. Confinement.
2. Responsible pet ownership.
3. Aggressive dogs.
4. Excessive barking.
5. Restraint.
6. Pet litter.

An issue that was of importance to animal management departments was registration and this must be added to the list.

A number of important messages Council wished to portray to dog owners was not getting through, they included;

Restraint

An effective way of preventing straying is by the construction of a fence.

Responsible pet ownership

We need to educate the owners about what dogs are permitted to do.

Owners of dogs are responsible for everything their dog does.

Excessive barking

Mediation will solve a majority of issues quickly

Confinement

If all dogs were adequately confined, minimal breaches of local law would occur.

FUTURE

The survey identified a number of issues which needed to be progressed. Our plan for the future of this survey will be contained in the next paper titled "animal management – marketing strategies"